Anime Q&A

*There wouldn't be much anime or manga in English without a dedicated corps of people working behind the scenes (or sometimes, in the limelight) to produce our favorite pastime. **Anime Q & A** brings you mini-interviews with the U.S. industry professionals who make it all possible. By **Jeff Yang***

*Where do all those dubbed videos you've been seeing recently come from, anyway? Good question, and here's one of the answers—from out of the frozen north, the land of maple syrup, hockey, and mounted police. Vancouver's Ocean Sound Corporation is not only responsible for the casting and dubbing of Viz's own RANMA 1/2, but also Pioneer's GREEN LEGEND RAN and the upcoming KISHIN CORPS, as well as Central Park Media's PROJECT A-KO. Anime Q&A speaks with **Ken Morrison**, director of Ocean Sound—the man who puts the "Eh?" in anime….*

Q: So what do you do for Ocean?

A: I'm one of the principals, and I'm director of Ocean Sound Corporation, which is the head production arm that takes care of the other areas of production. The Ocean Group is actually made up of seven companies. Besides the sound company, we have a casting company and we have a music publishing company, which publishes all the music we produce for animation. We do a lot of original music, you know—only forty percent of what we do is dubbing. The other sixty percent is new animation for animation producers around the world. We just finished fifty-two half-hours for *ExoSquad* for Universal, for instance, and we've also finished the first thirteen of what will be fifty-two half-hours for *Mega Man*. Pretty hot stuff—we're producing that for Capcom, based on their video game. That's an interesting project, because that's one of the first series that will be produced as an American production by a Japanese company—with American music and American-style sound effects.

Q: What are "American-style" sound effects?

A: Well, for most Japanese productions, the sound effects are not as hard-sounding—there aren't as many of them. If you listen to the sound of something like *Mega Man*, it's almost wall-to-wall sound; it's cut like a live-action show. Japanese shows, like most shows from Europe, are more sparse.

Q: And music?

A: Anybody who really wants to get a handle on the differences should turn on the television at 7:00 a.m. on Saturday, and channel-surf until noon, then play some anime. At that point, you'll get a really good idea. I would say, generally speaking, that American products tend to be more in the Warner Bros. vein—the music sounds almost like it's scored to the picture. There are accents in the music; where you watch Sylvester sneaking up on Tweety Pie you hear violins with the footsteps. If you look at the spectrum of music from scored to unscored—where it's just background and doesn't underscore the action—anime music is generally on the non-scored end of the scale. Although, obviously, if you see stuff like *Porco Rosso* [*"Kurenai no Buta," a.k.a. "The Crimson Pig"—Ed.*] you can tell it's more of a scored product.

Q: So you also do work for American animation companies?

A: And companies in other countries. We basically divide our two projects into two types, prelay and ADR. Prelay is where we lay out the dialogue first, and ADR is where we redub shows like *Ranma* or *Kishin Corps* or *Green Legend Ran*, or any of the dubbed projects we do. I'm just naming some anime projects, but we also do 130 or so half-hours of European dubbing as well, per year. And American…we did prelay for *ExoSquad*, *Dino Babies*, a lot of *Conan the Warrior*, forty or fifty episodes of *G.I. Joe*.

Q: How did Ocean get its start?

A: It started out as a recording studio in 1974, actually. By the '80s, we were recording everything—Bryan Adams, you know. And we had four studios in Vancouver, and the thrill was gone. We decided that we wanted to get into something else, so we got into doing voice-overs for commericals. We were the major sound producers for McDonald's in Western Canada—we did well over a thousand commercials. And then we were approached by a couple of companies in L.A. to produce voices for animation. Two of our earliest series were for Saban Entertainment—they do *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* now. The first series was called *Dragon Warrior*, the other was *Funky Fables*. Both were Japanese-dubbed series.

Q: Was it tough, going from doing commercials to producing animation voices?

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A: Well, you know, we were still learning, and we weren't used to airing deadlines. Sometimes we'd work on a show right up until the absolute deadline…past it, in fact. We found ourselves at the airport at 5:00 in the morning, because every morning there's something called the Delta Airlines fish run to L.A. It's a large cargo plane filled with fish. And because we'd miss the FedEx deadline, our lonely little tape would fly to L.A. with 5000 tons of fish. I think ten out of the first thirteen episodes we did went on the fish run.

Q: How do you cast the voices for a dubbed production?

A: We produce a story synopsis first, and a list of main and incidental recurring characters. Then we compile a psychological profile—what is the psychology behind each character? Why is this character doing what it's doing on-screen? What motivates it? And then we will do an initial audition, where we call twenty-five to thirty of the best voices in Vancouver for each character, the voices we feel are going to make the cut. So if we have ten characters, we call between 250 to 300 actors, take the six to eight best for each character, and then provide tapes of them to our clients for their final approval.

Q: What do you mean by "best"?

A: I'll tell you what we *used* to look for, before WordFit: (1) the ability of the actor to convey convincingly that voice-part to the screen. When you look at the screen, does the voice seem disembodied from the picture, or do you really believe the face on the screen is speaking those words? And (2) we'd look for actors who could technically deliver the lines in sync with the mouths. At that point, using the technology that everyone else was using, you had a little chance to fit things together, but for the most part, you had to be bang-on. Now, there's no worry at all—a person could be miles off and we could put it on laser disc and cut it together. I could talk to you for an hour, record it, edit it together, and make you say anything—seamlessly—and people who know you would swear you'd said it. See, WordFit is basically a computer with an immense amount of memory, but the real innovation is that its interface is a gas-plasma interactive screen. There's no keyboard or monitor. If you want to move somebody's voice, or one of the actors has spoken a line that's too long, you touch the screen with your finger and squeeze the line, like squeezing a pimple, and it compresses the line until it fits the mouth that's moving. It doesn't change the pitch, and it doesn't even sound faster. And if it's too short, you just take your finger and stretch it out.

Q: All of your actors are Canadian, though, aren't they?

A: Vancouver has the largest working animation voice-pool in the world. Disney's moving here, and a lot of other big companies are working in Vancouver. We use hardly any American talent at all. We even have a little book we've prepared called "How to Speak American for Canadians." It's basically a pronunciation guide. See, if you're Canadian, you say "hohce," not "house." You say "aboat," not "about." We even have someone who vets everything we do to remove that mid-Atlantic, Canadian tone, to make it American, who works vigorously to eradicate any semblance of non-American pronunciation—all those "You hoser, what do you think of that, eh?"s.

Q: What do you have in the works now?

A: We're still going strong on *Ranma*, of course, and we just did a series for Central Park Media, *Project A-Ko*. And we have a whole pile of things I can't mention now, except that they're very interesting and very significant. We've got five new studios coming online on December 13, so by then we'll have 12,000 square feet of studio space for animation. And we're still continuing our expansion.

Q: Who's your favorite character in anime?

A: My fave character is not from something we've done. It's the lead character in *Porco Rosso*…our friend, the piggy himself. Don't ask me why; it's just a gut affection. As for American voices, I really like some of the voices we've done for *Kishin Corps*, of which we've just done four one-hour episodes, for Pioneer LDCA. It's the first anime project with complete Dolby Surround. It's really wild—it sounds *huge*. If you don't have a Surround decoder, get one for this.

Q: Do you have any advice for a would-be voice-actor?

A: Find out who's doing the voices, send a resume, and be politely relentless. You could send us a tape, or if you've had some experience in animation, you could send us a reel of what you've done. Then move to Vancouver. I'm not kidding—we get fifteen to twenty resumes a month from actors moving from Toronto and Montreal and Los Angeles. It's very mild here, like San Francisco, and you can leave your car unlocked at night. There's virtually one-one thousandth of the crime of any major U.S. city, which is partly because we have public executions here.

Just kidding. We banned capital punishment years ago.

***Jeff Yang** is a New York-based freelance writer whose work often appears in THE VILLAGE VOICE. He is also Editor-in-Chief of A. MAGAZINE, THE ASIAN AMERICAN QUARTERLY.*